

Original Articles

# Defending european identity: Strategic compass and ontological security in International Relations

La defensa de la identidad europea: la Brújula Estratégica y  
la seguridad ontológica en las Relaciones Internacionales

## Information

### Dates:

Received: 06/10/2025

Accepted: 27/12/2025

Published: 31/12/2025

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### Conflict of interests:

The author declares no conflict  
of interest.

### Funding:

No funding received.

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## How to cite this paper

Begnini, P. (2025). Defending european identity: Strategic compass and ontological security in International Relations. *Revista de Cultura de Paz*, 9,302–322. <https://doi.org/10.58508/cultpaz.v9.257>

## RESUMEN

El dilema sobre la existencia de una identidad europea sigue generando debates largos y complejos, especialmente dentro del campo de las Relaciones Internacionales. En verdad, cuando hablamos de una identidad europea, nos referimos a una subjetividad que surge de múltiples subjetividades; de ahí la importancia de estudiar el self europeo, no solo como un ethos comunitario resultado de las interacciones entre las unidades que conforman su conglomerado cultural, sino también como una noción predominante que ha evolucionado y ha logrado perdurar como parte de un sistema en el que, históricamente, las relaciones con los Otros han sido fundamentalmente conflictivas. En un esfuerzo por reducir las posibilidades de conflicto y fomentar un entorno pacífico que garantice un proceso de integración eficaz, Europa ha reconocido que su seguridad va más allá de lo que ocurre dentro de sus propias fronteras. En consecuencia, la participación de la Unión Europea en el sistema internacional ha aumentado de manera constante hasta los acontecimientos geopolíticos de 2022, que pusieron de relieve la necesidad de encontrar nuevas orientaciones para definir una política exterior específica en materia de seguridad y defensa, dando lugar a la Brújula Estratégica y, quizás, a una Unión Europea plenamente desarrollada y preparada para defender su identidad latente.

**Palabras clave:** Unión Europea, seguridad ontológica, seguridad internacional, paz, identidad, conflicto.

## ABSTRACT

The dilemma about the existence of a European identity is still generating long and complex debates, specially within the field of International Relations. Truthfully, when we speak about a European Identity, we are referring to a subjectivity that comes from multiple subjectivities; herein lies the importance of studying the European-self; not only as a communal ethos as a result of the interactions between the units comprising its cultural conglomerate, but also as a prevailing notion that has evolved and has managed to endure as part of a system in which, historically, the relations with Others have been fundamentally conflictual. In efforts to reduce the possibilities of conflict and foster a peaceful environment that guarantees an effective integration process, Europe has recognized that their security goes beyond whatever is happening in their own borders. Consequently, the European Union's participation in the international system has increased steadily until the geopolitical events in 2022, which raised the need to find new directions in defining a specific foreign policy in regard to security and defense, leading to a Strategic Compass and, perhaps, a fully developed European Union ready to defend its latent identity.

**Keywords:** European Union, ontological security, international security, peace, identity, conflict.

## 1. Introduction

The dilemma surrounding the existence of a European identity within its broad social significance, has long driven an extensive and unresolved debate. However, the contemporary scene and International Relations hold a particular European understanding, which transcends a mere geographic-based logic and is able to adapt to a cultural, political and economic criterion. In fact, only since the latter half of the 20th century, it can be assured that *Europe* is associated with the terms: cooperation and integration.

To speak of a European identity is to refer to an international subjectivity<sup>1</sup> created based in multiple state subjectivities, given the fact that these serve as the most important unit<sup>2</sup> of the international system. In this detail, we find the relevance of the study of the European-self, not only as a communal ethos resultant from the interactions between the units that make up its socio-political conglomerate; but rather as the prevailing notion that has endured in a system, in which historically, the relations between units have been conflictual. The integrated political environment that nowadays we know as Europe has not always been an example of prosperity and consensus; yet the development of the intersubjective relations of the units that make it up have opened a cooperation continuum, that has shown shared principles that could explain the genesis of a community with explicit distinctive features.

In this sense, it is not logical to assure that the *international sphere is made up by relations* and that, therefore, it is impossible to have an International Relations concept that is not based in the intersubjectivity processes between its units, even though that said relations can be conflictual, in competence and surveillance regarding their amity and cooperation. Thereby, in the same manner as human relations, in the international context to exist is to coexist, meaning it is to establish vital and substantial relations with others (Torregrosa Sanchis, 2022) and according to this principle, every individuality would conceive others as a piece of its own existence. This study thus aims to delve into international identity from a social theory perspective—not merely as a constellation of distinguishing traits, but as the apex of the European Union's ontological projection.

In regards, the mere questioning about the presence of a single European identity should be related to the analysis of international relations, that has served as the environment for the appearance, development and vanishing of subjectivities. This does not imply that all the political actors involved have always been accounted by a juridical order, (especially those *relations* prior to the consolidation of a modern Estate); however, the relational nature of these

<sup>1</sup> In this work the term *subjectivity* to refer to the trait recognized as "our own"; in reference to the exteriorization of the notion identity of an individual (in this case the State). This notion should not be confused with *the qualities of the subjective* nor with the juridical dimension of *the subject of law*, rather as a manifestation of all that is recognized by an identity as property and that serves as a mean to shape the idea of the Self.

<sup>2</sup> The State is considered the most important study *unit* in the international system; this work without the prejudice that a theory in International Relations could accept or deny the existence of other actors that are just as relevant.

interactions hints at an inherent antagonism between subjectivities. In fact, and based in the *Peace of Westphalia*, the units (modern States) have been organized as an *international system*, primarily out of mutual concern over threats to a peaceful mode of existence. This historical moment marks the advent of relations between international subjectivities that not only address conflict but also necessitate cooperative endeavors predicated on the belief that diplomacy could serve as an alternative to militaristic action.

Additionally, the historical record proves that the foral relations between international subjectivities started as a recurrent practice used in periods of conflict, as these present themselves at the dawn of modernity as diplomatic dialogs that *culminated* in agreements which intended to establish a new order based in the principle of problem fixing without using war as a tool. This institutionalization of peace represents a pioneering framework for coexistence. However, what is most impressive is the motivation that has appeared while establishing common objectives, a drive rooted in the principle of security. The endeavor to preserve the existence of a Self in between the coexistence of Others, it's in its core the pursuit of security. This means that the self-recognition of an own identity (as an individual or as a State) assures its conditions of existence, *as one cannot preserve what does not exist*. Hence, classical theorists such as Thucydides, Niccolò Machiavelli, and Thomas Hobbes<sup>3</sup> emphasize the natural human impulse to coalesce in the face of existential threats, for survival necessitates alliances. This principle transcends individual human relations, extending into the international domain.

Against this background, the study of the European Union (EU) acquires particular significance. Despite its steadily increasing engagement in the international system, the EU has traditionally paid limited attention to issues of its own security. Since its institutional inception in the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC)—and even in the failed attempt to establish a European Defense Community—European integration has been predominantly centered around economic and commercial considerations, relegating security concerns to secondary status or delegating them to strategic allies. This is evidenced by the reliance of EU Member States on NATO for collective defense. However, with the conclusion of the Cold War, the security buffer enjoyed by Europe began to erode. The EU's external actions, which until then were largely confined to the commercial domain, were compelled to adopt a political dimension, reflecting a maturation in the EU's self-conceptualization as an international entity rooted in foundational values that continue to underpin Western civilization's social order.

<sup>3</sup> Found in the work: *Malian Dialogue*, *The Prince* and *The Leviathan* respectively. All of them are considered presenters of Realism in the International Relations theory, it is pertinent that the study for security is taken in consideration in every epistemological approach of sociology, political sciences and International Studies. Furthermore, this work is mainly focused in the particularities of the motivations in which the association of subjectivities are based in, stressing the role of *liberty* and *individuality* that are proper of identities; not only in the nature of conflicts that could condition its behaviour.

In recent decades, security has emerged as a central pillar within the EU's political agenda, underscoring the necessity of enhancing both normative and material capacities to safeguard its societal order and extend its international projection. This evolution underscores a commitment to safeguarding the European self amidst the coexistence with other international identities, ultimately advancing the EU's ambition to assume a role as a global actor.

Recent scholarship has emphasized that Russia's invasion of Ukraine represents not merely a security shock, but a profound ontological disruption for the European Union. The war has challenged long-standing assumptions regarding the stability of Europe's security environment and has forced the Union to reconsider its role as a global actor. As Maurer, Raube, and Whitman (2024) argue, the post-2022 period constitutes a *Zeitenwende* for European foreign and security policy, signaling a transition from normative restraint to strategic self-assertion. This transformation has important implications for European identity, as security initiatives increasingly function not only as policy instruments, but also as discursive mechanisms through which the EU reaffirms its collective Self in an increasingly conflictual international system.

As a preliminary step, this study will identify and interpret the foundational values of the EU's communal heritage as articulated in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), adopted in Lisbon on December 13, 2007. This analysis will be grounded in the notion of constructing a space of peace and development as a core identity principle within the EU's *ethos*. Additionally, the concept and content of the "*European way of life*" will be examined as a testament to a shared interest among European nations, particularly in terms of their resolve to safeguard this identity (internal ontological security).

Subsequently, this study will evaluate the impact of pre-existing security strategies preceding the Strategic Compass to elucidate the foundational elements of a collective security policy designed to transcend domestic boundaries. It will also consider the context within which this external strategy is intended to operate. Finally, an analysis of the Strategic Compass will explore its contribution to the formulation of an active European identity, one capable of advancing its strategic autonomy and harmonizing its external actions under the paradigm of external ontological security—projecting the EU as an emergent global power.

## 2. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative, interpretative, and theoretical-documental design, consistent with the epistemological premises of social constructivism and ontological security studies in International Relations. The objective is not to measure causal effects or behavioral outcomes, but to interpret meaning, identity construction, and normative orientation in the European

Union's security discourse, particularly as articulated through the Strategic Compass.

### **2.1. Materials and Corpus of Analysis**

The empirical corpus consists of primary and secondary documentary sources selected for their relevance in shaping, expressing, and institutionalizing the European Union's identity and security self-understanding. The primary sources analyzed include:

- The Treaty on European Union (TEU) and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), as foundational legal texts defining the Union's values, objectives, and institutional competences.
- The Strategic Compass for Security and Defence (European Union, 2022), as the central object of analysis and the most recent strategic document articulating the EU's security and defense orientation.
- Official declarations and conclusions of the European Council, with particular emphasis on the Versailles Declaration of March 2022, issued in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.
- Previous EU security frameworks, especially the European Union Global Strategy (EUGS, 2016), used as a comparative baseline to assess continuity and change in strategic discourse.
- Secondary sources consist of peer-reviewed academic literature on social constructivism, identity in International Relations, and ontological security, including both classical contributions and recent specialized studies focused on the European Union.

### **2.2. Analytical Procedure**

The study employs a discursive–conceptual analysis, grounded in qualitative interpretation of texts. The procedure unfolds in three stages:

Textual analysis of the selected documents to identify recurring concepts, narratives, and normative claims related to security, identity, peace, and external action.

Conceptual coding, through which key analytical categories are identified and systematized. The principal categories guiding the analysis are:

- Identity (European self-understanding and collective subjectivity),
- Ontological security (continuity, stability, and anxiety management),
- Peace (as value, objective, and organizing principle),
- Strategic autonomy (as an expression of agency and self-reliance).
- Comparative interpretation, contrasting the Strategic Compass with earlier strategic documents (notably the EUGS 2016) in order to trace patterns of discursive continuity, adaptation, or rupture.

This approach allows for an integrated reading of legal, strategic, and political texts as expressions of an evolving European identity embedded in specific historical and geopolitical contexts.

### **2.3. Criteria of Interpretation**

The interpretation of the material is guided by three main criteria:

- Normative coherence, assessing the consistency between the EU's declared values, legal commitments, and strategic objectives.
- Identity continuity and disruption, evaluating whether the Strategic Compass reinforces an established European identity or signals a qualitative transformation in the Union's self-conception as a security actor.
- Relationship between strategic discourse and security practices, examining how discursive constructions of threat, responsibility, and autonomy correspond to emerging policy orientations and institutional developments.

By combining documentary analysis with constructivist and ontological security perspectives, this methodological design enables a systematic examination of how the Strategic Compass contributes to the articulation of an active European identity while remaining embedded in the Union's long-standing commitment to peace.

## **3. Contribution of theory**

After the intervention of social Constructivism as an explanatory paradigm for International Relations, a lot of the traditional concepts (which had been accepted as immutable amidst realist-liberal debates) have been questioned or reformulated. Constructivists, for instance, argue that states, as unitary actors, can be legitimately ascribed anthropomorphic qualities such as identities, interests, and intentionality, while also contending that the characteristics realists consider essential to these actors—primarily their despotic and self-serving nature—are in fact socially constructed and contingent (Schouten, 2007).

Contemporary debates on ontological security have significantly expanded the concept beyond its original sociological formulation. Recent systematic reviews demonstrate that ontological security has evolved into a central analytical lens in International Relations, particularly for understanding how political actors manage anxiety, continuity, and identity under conditions of systemic crisis (Balkan-Şahin & Çetiner, 2025). In this literature, ontological security is no longer treated as a purely psychological condition, but as a discursively sustained state of being, reproduced through narratives, routines, and institutional practices. This perspective is particularly relevant for the European Union, whose identity is continuously constructed through legal texts,

strategic documents, and public declarations rather than through traditional state practices alone.

Alexander Wendt's contributions are pivotal to this discourse. Wendt conceives of the state as an organizational actor governed by a political authority structure that is integrally constructed around the aggregation of social identities. General State Theory recognizes five constitutive elements of the state: (a) *an institutional legal framework* comprising norms and institutions that regulate population coexistence; (b) *a monopoly on the use of force*, signifying the centralized capacity to wield coercive and destructive resources<sup>4</sup>; (c) *full sovereignty*, denoting the exercise of political authority—a foundation of legitimate power; (d) *a society*, initially as a fundamental premise of the state but later distinguishing itself clearly from it, as societies may form states (a bottom-up process) while states also actively shape societies (top-down<sup>5</sup>); and (e) *territory*, conceptualized as space, though constructivism envisions territory as perpetually evolving, with borders that are not necessarily fixed. Wendt posits two essential realities: first, that states are produced by warfare; and second, that no border is ever definitively final (Wendt, 1992).

### 3.1. Identities

In alignment with the concepts presented, certain anthropological considerations are necessary to examine the emergence of state identity. Analogous to the human experience, a state possesses an inherent (natural<sup>6</sup>) identity at birth but requires an assigned (functional<sup>7</sup>) identity to initiate its coexistence within the international system. Within constructivist theory, identity is thus defined as the intrinsic characteristics of intentional actors (emphasizing the role of self-generated intentions), which in turn give rise to motivational and

4 For the purposes of this study, it is essential to highlight that Constructivism asserts that coercive or security institutions within the same state cannot be rivals, nor should they resolve their differences using the resources granted by their legitimate monopoly on force. Therefore, security communities—or, in other words, shared security systems—are often established, not only to counter threats but also to prevent internal conflict through mechanisms of unification and cooperation. Security agencies must be unified to perceive a threat to others as if it were a threat to themselves (collective security), ultimately allowing for the formation of decentralized political structures with full capacity for collective action (Schouten, 2007).

Traditionally, Social Theory has explained the dynamics adopted by various human groups to collectively mobilize around shared goals and needs. As noted, Constructivism accepts comparisons between these anthropological behaviors and many of the foreign actions of states. Along this line, it is also worth proposing the possibility of finding examples of bottom-up generation at the systemic level—that is, from states to integration or intergovernmental cooperation communities, with the distinction that these communities generally do not subscribe to the notion of centralized authority.

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6 The natural identity of the state is formed through the social and cultural constructs that have established it as an actor. It is a flexible and malleable identity that requires contact with other identities to either reaffirm or modify itself.

7 The attributed identity is the result of the state's interaction with other similar units. It is worth noting that the state itself may sometimes assign this mature identity to itself (functional self-attribution). This clarification highlights that, although interaction between states is significant for the formation of both individual and collective identity, it is not always decisive. In fact, it often occurs that the more a state interacts with the system, the stronger and deeper the reaffirmation of its particular identity becomes.

behavioral dispositions (Wendt, 1999). This concept clarifies the interconnection between identity, motivation, intention, and behavior, suggesting that intersubjective interpretations are pivotal not only in defining state identity but even more significantly in formulating interests. Actors do not carry a static agenda of interests independent of the social context; rather, interests are defined throughout coexistence and in response to the situations encountered (Wendt, 1992).

The concept of ontological security emerges from classical security, typically understood as “a quality possessed by subjects free from threats or aggressions against their individuality” (Orozco, 2005). With this understanding, security can be conceptualized as both an adjective and a noun<sup>8</sup>—as a condition of exemption from threats to liberty, peace, and individual development (“being secure”), and as an abstract noun, an object of study or a nominal concept referring to a universal notion beyond mere naming<sup>9</sup>. This distinction is crucial if security is to be endowed with a dual significance, combining positive attributes (a condition of freedom that promotes well-being and development) with negative ones (an absence of threats). Furthermore, this duality transcends nominalism.

In its application to political and international reality, classical security has often been exemplified in the material attributes of states, such as territory, industrial capabilities, or military potential. In other words, classical security pertains to conditions that “ensure the continuity of society, but not necessarily the ethos of the community” (Reyes Silva, 2015). Here, a critical distinction emerges between material security for a society and, by extension, ontological security. English sociologist Anthony Giddens, in the final decade of the 20th century, proposed the concept of ontological security as a broad existential dimension in the social world. Giddens posits that “to be ontologically secure is to possess, at the level of both unconscious and practical consciousness, answers to the fundamental existential questions that arise, in some form, in all human lives” (Giddens, 1995).

In these terms, ontological security is a mental state (individual or collective) in which a profound cosmological perception of reality provides existential balance. This perception offers a sense of order and continuity, as it affirms that despite prevailing threats and dangers, the dominant order persists, thereby furnishing partial responses to existential questions. Within

<sup>8</sup> The reference to its abstract substantive nature indicates that not all dimensions of security can be perceived through the external senses (sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell). While its material dimension is largely perceptible, security also extends to the psychic, psychological, emotional, and cosmological realms of human existence. Collective mentality, religion, and ideas in general also provide a sense of security. “Security is a state in which the dangers and conditions that could cause physical, psychological, or material harm are controlled to preserve the health and well-being of individuals and the community. It is an essential component of daily life, enabling individuals and communities to realize their aspirations” (WHO, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> Nominalism suggests that the names given to entities are particular, denying the universal reality that underlies them. Therefore, each name or concept would be incapable of truly defining its object of study. A nominalist would argue that each time the term *security* is used, it refers to a distinct phenomenon, describing a particular reality and never an absolute one. This work rejects that thesis, instead emphasizing the use of certain categorical distinctions that illustrate different phenomena while acknowledging the existence of permanent or universal realities.

this framework, the study of International Relations must increasingly focus on ontological<sup>10</sup> security as a complement to material security<sup>11</sup>. Indeed, academic analyses incorporating this terminology are on the rise, particularly those examining the role of international security and the presence or absence of external threats as a factor in constituting subjects' ontological security (Callejo, 2016).

Within the international realm, it is therefore essential to recognize the dependency between the material and ontological dimensions of security, as ontological security may at times be established at the expense of material security. Such a situation might arise when the *subjective perception of security* results from an ongoing conflict, which, due to its prolonged duration, leads to a relative state of stability in the collective perception (Mitzen, 2006). In this context, *recurrent threats gradually lose their novelty, becoming passive realities*; consequently, institutional and social actors (states or populations) develop a certain acclimatization to conflict. This does not imply that material dangers associated with conflict cease to impact actors; rather, *subjective perception does not equate to material immunity*. Instead, the relationship is inversely proportional: the greater the degree of ontological security, the lesser the degree of material security (reduction in conflict intensity). Yet, "when unable to achieve ontological security, some actors opt to remilitarize their foreign policy, underscoring the complex interplay between these security conceptions and their political and military implications" (Pintado Lobato, 2015).

Recent contributions further emphasize the relational and emotional dimensions of ontological security. In International Relations, this concept was systematically introduced by Mitzen (2006), who demonstrated that states may prioritize identity continuity over physical security, even sustaining conflictual relationships because they provide predictable routines that stabilize the Self.

Mitzen's contribution is crucial in showing that security-seeking behavior cannot be reduced to threat minimization. Instead, political actors often seek stable patterns of interaction, even when these are materially costly, because they reduce existential uncertainty. Ontological security, in this sense, is maintained through routines, narratives, and institutionalized expectations that render the international environment intelligible.

Steele (2008) further deepens this perspective by linking ontological security directly to foreign policy behavior. For Steele, states act not only to survive

<sup>10</sup> The central presumption of this theory suggests that the perception of order and continuity in one's reality can be disrupted by a destabilizing event. In the case of an individual, the sudden death of a family member, for example, may lead someone who has never encountered death to question the meaning of life profoundly. In the realm of international security, a conflict (whether anticipated or sudden) alters the ontological security of states and may eventually lead them to modify their interests and behaviors.

<sup>11</sup> "Conceptions of security based purely on material calculations must be reformulated to develop a broader catalog of security types that considers other variables. In fact, the multiplication and diversification of global threats invite a rethinking of security. For this very purpose, perspectives that emphasize processes—such as the developments of the English School, constructivism, or critical theory—are revealed to be essential" (Pintado Lobato, 2015).

materially, but to remain faithful to a coherent sense of self-identity. Foreign policy decisions, including risky or normatively costly actions, can thus be understood as attempts to preserve autobiographical narratives that sustain a stable Self over time. This insight is particularly relevant for understanding how security strategies function as identity-affirming practices, rather than purely instrumental tools.

More recent contributions emphasize the relational and affective dimensions of ontological security. Rumelili (2015; 2020) highlights how political communities stabilize their identities through processes of Othering, constructing difference as a means of reinforcing internal coherence. Ontological insecurity, in this view, emerges when established boundaries between Self and Other are destabilized, generating anxiety and prompting discursive or strategic responses aimed at restoring order.

Similarly, Kinnvall (2016; 2021) foregrounds the role of anxiety, uncertainty, and populist narratives in periods of geopolitical rupture. Her work demonstrates how crises intensify ontological insecurity, leading political actors to reassert identity through simplified narratives, moral boundaries, and appeals to collective belonging. Applied to the European context, these dynamics help explain why moments of systemic disruption—such as Russia’s invasion of Ukraine—trigger intensified efforts to reaffirm the European Union’s identity as a community of values, peace, and responsibility.

Taken together, these approaches shift the analytical focus from material capabilities to identity continuity and meaning-making. Ontological security thus provides a framework for understanding how strategic documents, institutional practices, and policy narratives function as mechanisms for stabilizing collective identity. In the case of the European Union, this perspective is particularly apt, as its identity is constituted less through traditional state practices and more through legal texts, strategic frameworks, and public discourse.

## **4. The European Union and its way of life in defining a European identity**

The European Union (EU) stands as a political community institutionalized as a regional international organization, endowed explicitly with international legal personality. The current structure of the EU derives from the reform initiated by the Treaty of Lisbon, signed on December 13, 2007, which entered into force on December 1, 2009. Through this treaty, the EU succeeded the European Community (EC), assuming its rights and obligations. The EU’s legal framework is founded on two key treaties: the Treaty on European Union

(TEU) and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU<sup>12</sup>), both holding equal legal authority. The EU's operational framework is dual in nature: it functions as an integration organization (community model) and also incorporates intergovernmental elements (intergovernmental model).

The EU represents a *sui generis*<sup>13</sup> model of integration and operation, grounded in its unique legal order—the European Union Law (EUL). This integration process is rooted in fundamental values, such as respect for human dignity, liberty, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and human rights<sup>14</sup>. These values, fundamental in nature, underpin the EU's objectives, which initially emerge with a broad scope and material reach (Ferrer Lloret, Requena Casanova et al., 2020).

The EU is widely recognized as a model of intersubjective cooperation, transcending commercial logic to become a comprehensive unit whose global participation is increasingly significant. “Europe has always possessed distinctive connotations that have influenced other countries and continents in a singular manner... this connotation has created a style—Europeanism. ‘Europeanism’ is based on the identification of Europe as a civilizing concept, with its unique worldview and way of life” (Elices Huecas, 1998).

However, the fundamental question underpinning the EU's challenges is the effective capacity of its community of values to preserve itself in a world characterized by conflict and constant transformation. If, as previously mentioned, international processes are perpetual and represent genuine vehicles for change, then how will the EU ensure its continuity in the world? Numerous sociological assessments address this question, as it is evident that questioning the stability of a political conglomerate exposes potential threats to the order it provides for its citizens and other entities within the system. Therefore, it is essential to examine the common principles that first fostered the EU's social and later institutional consolidation of its European subjectivity, and subsequently identify one of its core communal interests, ultimately recognizing the threats that could undermine its existence.

<sup>12</sup> This work uses the Maastricht Treaty (officially, the Treaty on European Union, TEU) as a bibliographic source, signed on February 7, 1992, and coming into effect on November 1, 1993. The current version of this Treaty is the one resulting from the reform introduced by the Treaty of Lisbon on December 13, 2007, which came into effect in 2009.

<sup>13</sup> If one considers its legal dimension, the EU immediately becomes a global benchmark. Through its own strictly practical legal mechanisms, European Union law processes operate without the need for a harmonized constitutional framework to protect them. However, this may not imply that the EU is not already in search of an even more binding integration alternative. This possibility is considered not only as a parallel alternative to existing legal frameworks but also as a necessity for governmental evolution. If the EU is indeed unique in its kind and its founding nature initially proposed a new legal order, transformation would be a constant and unequivocal element in the Union's definition.

<sup>14</sup> Article 2 of the TEU lists this catalog and adds that “these values are common to the Member States in a society characterized by pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity, and equality between women and men” (TEU, 2009).

#### 4.1. The objectives of the European Union

Article 3 of the TEU establishes the EU's objectives, premised on the idea that the Union "is intended to promote peace, its values, and the well-being of its peoples." In this regard, the concept of pacification and the well-being of its peoples serve as a transversal or guiding purpose in its institutional development. Thus, the primary overarching objective of the European integration process is precisely the promotion of peace and the advancement of its values, traceable to its origins in the Schuman Declaration of May 9, 1950. This objective arises within the context of the longest sustained period of peace enjoyed by the Member States of the EU over the past centuries<sup>15</sup>. Additionally, it is worth noting that this principal objective simultaneously entails the promotion of the EU's values. As previously stated, these values include principles such as human dignity, liberty, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and human rights—all aligned with a distinct social identity reflective of the continent, the birthplace of Western Civilization. Therefore, reaffirming "the importance of certain essential values of the Union is not merely a theoretical or philosophical exercise; it is a constitutional and normative matter rooted in the consideration of the Union as a community of values, where democracy and the rule of law constitute its core elements, and more importantly, are normative and justiciable" (Martín and Pérez de Nanclares, 2019).

From the perspective of ontological security, the objectives enshrined in Article 3 of the TEU perform a function that goes beyond legal or normative aspiration. They provide a stable narrative framework through which the European Union understands itself as a political community oriented toward peace, well-being, and the rule of law. As recent analyses of European discourse suggest, these values operate as anchors of continuity, allowing the EU to preserve a coherent sense of Self even as external conditions become increasingly volatile (Diez, 2024). In this sense, peace is not only a policy objective, but a constitutive element of European identity.

#### 4.2 Peace as common interest

Recent history demonstrates how these values have fostered a series of preventative alliances, capable of minimizing the necessity for conflict to the point of rendering it virtually obsolete. This implies that traditionally adversarial European nations managed, at a given time, to replace the notion of an "enemy" with that of a "rival" (in commercial terms, for example), and today, even this rivalry has largely dissolved, as shared values and mutual needs, supported by the benefits of institutional development, have eliminated any bellicose intentions. In 2022, what real probability exists that a clash of inter-

<sup>15</sup> Truthfully, the European Union received the Nobel Prize for peace in 2012, for *taking Europe from a continent in war to a continent in peace*. The, then, President of the European Parliament Martin Schulz declared: 'the European Union has reunited the continent peacefully and has integrated old enemies [...] even though there have been challenges that include the economical conditions, the European Union creates stability, prosperity and democracy' (European Parliament, 2012)

ests between France and Germany could escalate into an armed conflict? The answer is straightforward: the likelihood is marginal or nonexistent.

In the second half of the 20th century, considering the devastating consequences of both World Wars, European governments recognized that their common cultural attributes could consolidate a higher identity capable of harmonizing interests. Although initially a complex endeavor, this collective project ultimately centered on a singular, paramount interest: preventing another war (an explicit aim within the Schuman Declaration, as will be elaborated later). To reduce conflict to its lowest probability, the stakeholders developed a formula rooted in liberal democracy (a value justified as a distinctively European trait)<sup>16</sup>: commercial alliances foster cooperation, which in turn reduces the potential for conflict. This functional idealism posits that while cooperation around a shared purpose mitigates conflict, it is primarily the fear of conflict that initially drives cooperation.

If, indeed, the European Union is a unique economic and political association, “its first steps consisted of promoting economic cooperation, with the notion that as economic interdependence among countries increased, the likelihood of conflict would decrease” (Sánchez Muñoz, 2016). This insight is crucial for conceptualizing the EU, as its primary operational mechanism aligns with the dual<sup>17</sup> security concept’s second meaning: seeking a condition of minimal threat. Thus, a cooperative environment provides the ideal space for prosperity and the development of its way of life. Despite the existence of potential destabilizing factors (threats), merely acknowledging these factors represents a proactive step toward their mitigation and potential eradication.

### 4.3. From peace to the european way of life

Thus far, the European Union has been defined as a political community whose genesis revolves around the idea that integration among its Members reduces the probability of conflict, rendering the resultant peace a stabilizing element for what could be considered the EU’s ontological security. Retrospective examination reveals the enduring significance of this fundamental interest, which initially acted as a principal driver for establishing the European integration process. However, the establishment of this initial internal ontological security within the Union must not be passive; it is insufficient merely to achieve peaceful coexistence within its borders. The subsequent challenge lies in sustaining and exporting this peace. In other words, the EU

16 The preface of the European Union Treaty constantly references to the patrimonial tangible and intangible elements of Europe: The higher areas of the Treaty ‘Basing in the cultural, religious, and humanitarian heritage in Europe, from which universal values from human rights, as liberty, democracy, equity and the State of Right have been developed’ is resolved by creating a Union. (EUT, 2009)

17 As it was revealed, the concept of security has a dual significance, that contributes positive traits (liberty condition that is given to preserve wellbeing and development) and negative traits (lack of threats as a condition). In regards, the European institutionality has only managed to unfold in a safe environment, in which its social and political conditions gave the scene for their objectives to be formulated. This is why, the definition of security given by Antonio Elices is said as ‘a group of people or institutions that use the same mechanisms that assure its working and protection of external attacks.’ (Elices Huecas, 1998)

must attain continuity in the practices derived from pacifying its communal processes and subsequently extend this stability to its international neighborhood—a complex task, given the diversity of political and strategic cultures in the region. This study will next examine how peaceful coexistence is maintained within the framework of the EU's internal ontological security.

Beyond the debate over the existence of a European way of life, it is implicit that a motivation exists to enhance the institutional resilience of the European order. The lifestyle of Union citizens has fostered a communal ethos that necessitates safeguarding. As previously noted, the EU appears to have prioritized the construction of mechanisms that favor the stability of a community-wide ontological security zone (within its political borders). For this reason, the initiative to protect values and principles—collectively, a European way of life—constitutes both a strategy for promoting and maintaining the rule of law within the Union and a set of legal and political mechanisms that ensure peaceful coexistence in the social relationships of its citizens and the institutions that serve them.

However, this strategy is designed to protect the European way of life within the Union, thus internally focused, necessitating recognition that the prevalence of one way of life may be threatened only by the imminence of another. The EU appears aware of this reality and, to safeguard its rule of law and institutions, has introduced preventative measures against potential threats within the community<sup>18</sup>. Promoting the European way of life is equivalent to securing it, not defending it, as security entails establishing a stable environment in the absence of risk (ontological security), while defense responds to instability introduced by risk (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, SIPRI, 2020), with the ultimate goal of restoring a secure state.

In summary, if there is indeed a European way of life, it serves as the primary motivation for the Member States to secure the Union, achieved through its intricate process of communal pacification. What distinguishes the European context is that a "domestic" focus encompasses not only a strictly subjective reality (the European Union) but also an intersubjective reality embedded within it (Member States), thus presenting the challenge of reaching consensus amid the diversity of strategic cultures, which remain in the sovereign and independent purview of each state.

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<sup>18</sup> These threats can attack the lifestyle of the community. They are diverse and involve a wide range of actors and mechanisms that go beyond the concept of traditional tangible security. The growing reappearance of specific antidemocratic ideological postures, organized crime at a transnational level, terrorism or extreme nationalist movements, are part of the wide range of threats that could affect the peaceful balance that the State of Law in the European Union has created.

## 5. The role of the strategic compass in 2022

On June 16, 2020, European defense ministers agreed to develop a document titled the *Strategic Compass for Security and Defense*, a concept initially proposed by the German presidency at the time. The proposal stipulated that this document should be developed over a two-year period, ultimately to be launched under the French presidency in the latter half of 2022 (European Council, 2019).

The *Strategic Compass* would crystallize the European Union's role as a security provider within the international system<sup>19</sup>. Furthermore, it sought to address Europe's longstanding security and defense challenges, which, as examined here, had been overshadowed for a variety of reasons—including the stabilization of its internal ontological security, the bipolarity of the Cold War system, and the overshadowing role of the United States. In this regard, the Council “decided to develop a strategic concept—distinctly termed a *compass* to differentiate it from NATO's—guiding the development of security and defense components over the next decade” (Arteaga, 2022). Despite broader reflections, the Council unanimously recognized the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) as a weak link within the EU's operational chain. Thus, it was agreed that the *Strategic Compass* would be developed in two stages (Pontijas Calderón, 2021).

The first stage consisted of intelligence gathering to establish an integrated threat assessment. To this end, civilian and military intelligence units within the European External Action Service (EEAS) implemented a methodology capable of identifying all estimated threats and challenges facing the EU. This data would serve as empirical evidence for the final document's formation. While this threat assessment was reportedly completed in the second half of 2020, its findings remain unpublished, likely due to its classified nature. The second stage involved drafting the *Strategic Compass* throughout 2021 and the first part of 2022, using the collected information alongside the structure, content, and functions outlined in prior strategies<sup>20</sup>. If the EU had indeed sought to define new orientations and policy priorities as needed, the *Strategic Compass* aimed to equip Member States with the necessary tools to define the EU's objectives specifically in the realms of security and defense. Consequently, it was initially proposed that four areas of work (referred to as “baskets”) would be identified, each with corresponding questions to facilitate their implementation. Colonel José Luis Pontijas Calderón, an artillery officer and professor, summarizes these questions as follows:

<sup>19</sup> While this general idea has been seen in previous strategies, the Compass stay in certain operative capacities that would allow the EU to intervene in a decisive manner against a situation that would involve the use of force. For instance, the capacity to transport military forces without the necessity to reach out to excessive procedural inconveniences.

<sup>20</sup> In chronological order: The European Agenda for security (2015), the European Global Strategy for Foreign Policies and Security, known as the Mogherini Strategy (2016), The Strategy for the Security Union (2020) and the New Global Strategy of Union (2019)

**Table 1.** Baskets and Relevant Questions for the Strategic Definition of the EU

| Cestos                    | Preguntas relevantes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Gestión de crisis         | <p>¿Operaciones a qué escala y con qué concurrencia?</p> <p>¿Qué prioridad funcional? (ej. seguridad marítima)</p> <p>¿Qué prioridad regional?</p> <p>¿Qué conexiones de la PCSD con otras políticas?</p> <p>¿Futuro de los Grupos de Combate?</p> <p>¿Estructuras de mando de la Unión?</p> <p>¿Cómo impulsar el proceso de generación de fuerzas?</p> <p>¿Prioridades en la implementación del Paquete Civil?</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Desarrollo de capacidades | <p>¿Qué significa la autonomía estratégica en cuanto al desarrollo de capacidades?</p> <p>¿Qué conexión entre capacidades y escenarios de crisis?</p> <p>¿Cómo pueden la PESCO y el Fondo Europeo de Defensa contribuir a mejorar las carencias en capacidades?</p> <p>¿Cómo enlazar el proceso de planeamiento de capacidad de la UE con la OTAN?</p> <p>¿Cuáles son las prioridades para la movilidad militar?</p> <p>¿Debe revisarse el Objetivo de Capacidades de 1999/2004?</p>                                                                                                                                       |
| Resiliencia               | <p>¿Cómo contribuye la UE a la defensa territorial?</p> <p>¿Cómo articular la asistencia mutua (art.42-7 TUE) y las cláusulas de solidaridad (art. 222 TFUE) a la luz del art. V de la OTAN?</p> <p>¿Qué lecciones se han obtenido de la cooperación civil-militar durante la pandemia?</p> <p>¿Cómo mejorar las herramientas de la UE para enfrentarse a las amenazas híbridas incluyendo la desinformación?</p> <p>¿Cuál podría ser la división de tareas/sinergias entre la UE y la OTAN al responder a una amenaza híbrida o ciber?</p> <p>¿Hasta dónde y cómo debe la UE actuar de manera conjunta en el espacio?</p> |
| Partenariado              | <p>¿Cómo profundizar en la cooperación OTAN-UE a pesar de los obstáculos políticos?</p> <p>¿Qué significa efectivamente un enfoque más estratégico respecto al partenariado con terceros países?</p> <p>¿Debería haber un partenariado de seguridad y defensa con Reino Unido más profundo y sui generis y qué entrañaría?</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |

Source: José Luis Pontijas Calderón, 2021

In the context of the global lockdown triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, the first draft (or initial document) of the *Strategic Compass* was presented by the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy in November 2021. Subsequently, it underwent further revisions with the aim that the initial version would yield a final, legally binding document. “The second agreement will have the nature of a juridical-political document, ultimately to be adopt-

ed by the EU Council (the anticipated outcome of Phase 2 of the strategic negotiation process from January 2021 to June 2022)” (Satué de Córdova Minguet, 2021). Naturally, “from February to March 2022, several versions emerged to capture the debate among Member States and incorporate the set of measures on defense and space policy presented by the Commission up to February 15” (European Council, 2022).

However, the global geopolitical landscape was on the cusp of a major shift. At approximately 6:00 a.m. Moscow time on February 24, 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced the launch of a “special military operation,” followed by a series of airstrikes signaling the beginning of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, in contravention of the fundamental principles and norms of international law. This event marked a pivotal moment for both European and global security. First, it represented a disruption in Europe’s ontological security; and second, it underscored the presence of Russia as a global power with a problematic identity. Consequently, on March 10, an informal meeting of Heads of State and Government was convened in Versailles<sup>21</sup> to examine the details of Russia’s military aggression. The declaration issued at this meeting stated:

“Two weeks ago, Russia brought war back to Europe. Russia’s unprovoked and unjustified military aggression against Ukraine grossly violates international law and the principles of the United Nations Charter, undermining European and global security and stability. [...] A stronger, more capable Union in the field of security and defense will make a positive contribution to transatlantic and global security and will complement NATO, which remains the cornerstone of the collective defense of its members. [...] The forthcoming Strategic Compass will provide operational guidance across all dimensions of security and defense to make the European Union a more robust and capable guarantor of security” (European Council, Versailles Declaration, 2022).

Considering these developments and to achieve both the general objectives and those outlined in past strategies, EU authorities and technical personnel were compelled to expedite the established deadlines to immediately implement effective countermeasures.

The *Strategic Compass* reflects the EU’s acknowledgment of a rapidly evolving world with pressing global challenges, challenges that demand decisive action and a clear understanding of the consequences of collective conflict. Against this backdrop, the *Compass* underscores that the return of war to Europe constitutes a pivotal moment for the EU to actively participate in the international system, moving away from passivity<sup>22</sup>. Indeed, “the profound geopolitical shifts we are witnessing are compromising our ability to promote

<sup>21</sup> In regards to the Declaration of Versailles in March 11<sup>th</sup> of 2022. Listed in the bibliography of this paper.

<sup>22</sup> Denying in *stricto sensu* the realist thesis that affirms anarchy and the distribution of power are both determinative factors in the behaviour of the units. As much as this threat *gives motives*, it is the identity (free and independent) the one that decides on *acting*.

our vision and defend our interests” (European Council, 2022). Consequently, the document portrays a complex international landscape, one markedly distinct from that of the late 20th century, where cooperation<sup>23</sup> is neither a given nor inherently achievable. This description of a challenging environment is coupled with the EU’s resolute stance, reflecting a clear maturation in its identity<sup>24</sup>. At the same time, it reaffirms its commitments to strategic partners to contribute to a global order grounded in the values that define the EU and have long been integral to its way of life.

## 5. Conclusions

Ensuring the continuity and preservation of European symbolism constitutes an essential motivation, supplementing the EU’s original objective of averting war. The European Union has long been engaged in a cooperative project designed to uphold and propagate its way of life above all others, a notion that implicitly suggests that international subjectivities continue to shape and mutually reinforce each other’s identity frameworks. The promotion of a “European way of life” is a mechanism for managing the internal affairs of the Union, especially in areas concerning the maintenance of public order and the fight against terrorism and organized crime. However, it is crucial to recognize that promoting the European way of life is an act of securing it, not defending it. This distinction is significant, as domestic security entails the establishment of a stable environment free of risk (ontological security), whereas defense implies a reactive measure in response to destabilizing factors, ultimately aimed at restoring the previously held secure state.

As this study has revealed, the concept of European ontological security has remained relatively stable since the latter half of the 20th century, particularly in its final decade, as the dissolution of the Soviet Union reinforced the belief that threats to Europe’s way of life had substantially diminished. This “bubble” of ontological security has simultaneously minimized the Union’s security role on the global stage, whether due to the bipolarity of the Cold War system, NATO’s prominent role, or U.S. leadership. However, the emergence of other comparably strong identities—such as that of Russia—has engendered a situation wherein competing interests have led to a disruptive event, challenging the EU’s ontological security and casting doubt on the effectiveness of its vital order while reintroducing both new and longstanding threats.

The findings of this study align with recent theoretical debates that distinguish ontological security from purely material or societal conceptions of security. As Floyd (2024) argues, ontological security is primarily concerned with the preservation of a stable Self, rather than with the elimination of threats

<sup>23</sup> Belying the neoliberal thesis of International Relations, in which it is established that the most part of the exterior action in Europe in the time passed in the 21st century.

<sup>24</sup> Affirming the constructivist thesis that explains the appearance of the subjectivity in the principles and values of a communal ethos and the interactions among other individuals.

per se. Applied to the European Union, this distinction helps explain why the Strategic Compass does not signal a militarization of European identity, but rather an attempt to secure the conditions under which Europe's culture of peace can endure. The Compass thus reflects a strategic adaptation aimed at safeguarding the Union's foundational narrative in a world where peace can no longer be taken for granted.

In conclusion, and addressing the initial proposition of this work, the Strategic Compass indeed represents the final stage in the formation of an active European identity. This identity will extend beyond security to influence all aspects of external action, positioning the EU as a global actor committed to embedding system-wide balance and international peace through the exercise of its values—or, at the very least, fostering such an aspiration.

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